

A Proposed Center for Antiracist, Just, and Equitable Futures

Working Group C

Draft Recommendations for Senate Consideration (01/20/2020)

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1. Background

[Working Group C](#) (WG-C) was charged with developing plans for an “Antiracism Center” as part of the larger [antiracism initiative](#). A Center focuses scholarly and public attention on issues and research topics in ways that a department, school, or college cannot. Together with the graduate field system and other organizational structures that we have at Cornell, they promote interdisciplinary research, innovation, and a collaborative spirit. We are well known for our [91 centers, 70 institutes, and 43 programs](#) of which [more than twenty](#) have a focus on aspects of race, ethnicity and inequality.

Antiracism centers are being established or expanded at [peer institutions](#) across the United States. Over the years various task force reports at Cornell have suggested the creation of a center that deals with race and ethnicity. These [past efforts](#), the entangled histories of colonization and racism in the United States, and the urgency in the current moment, framed the deliberations of WG-C.

What do we mean by “antiracism” and why is there a call to create an Antiracism Center?

President Pollack’s [July 2020 Directive](#) to develop plans for an Antiracism Center and various educational programs was prompted by the nation-wide protests that followed the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. Black student activism at Cornell reminded us that the forces of structural racism and systemic bias are at work in our own community and that we have an obligation to address the problem through teaching, research, and proactive community engagement.

We understand “racism” in the U.S. to include the many interlocking and mutually constitutive forms of racisms directed at Black American, Indigenous, LatinX, Asian American, and other historically marginalized peoples on whom impacts still persist in the context of settler colonialism. We accept as well that Black Women and Women of Color in general experience racism in ways which intersect with institutional sexism. Racism operates globally; various groups are dehumanized by hierarchies, structures, policies, systems and practices in their contexts. While we acknowledge that racisms are connected, we also note that an ahistorical and abstract equivalence cannot be attached to all forms.

By “anti” we signal the necessity of proactive opposition. Use of the prefix foregrounds an intellectual, political, and moral imperative to oppose the hierarchical structuring of social relations that are predicated on ideologies of white supremacy.

By “Center” we envision a permanent, institutionally-supported unit that responds to instantiations of racism that are brought to the fore by current events while at the same time being a constant, unrelenting advocate for racial equality and healing. For example, in this historical moment, the Center must mount effective responses to the anti-Black racism that is currently raging. Concurrently, it must support long term work that seeks to understand the relationship of race and ethnicity to settler colonialism and violent indigenous dispossession, interrogating hierarchies in both local and global contexts. The Center should be unique in how it engages students and faculty across campus through collaboration, taking a unified and comparative approach to teaching, research, and engagement with on-campus and off-campus communities.

2. The Mission of the Center

We envision a Center that will focus our attention on a just and equitable future, while acknowledging that our current lives and their meanings are inscribed in violent pasts of colonization, dispossession, enslavement, exclusion, and racialization, both in the United States and abroad. To capture the intended scope of activity we propose that the unit be called “**The Center for Antiracist, Just, and Equitable Futures.**” We fully understand that a more appropriate name may emerge as discussions unfold. Also to be considered are naming opportunities that would sharpen outside perceptions of what the Center is all about. “The Toni Morrison Center for Racial Justice” was one of several interesting suggestions discussed within the Working Group.

The Center should amplify and support rigorous scholarship, engaged research, performance, art, and design to build a community of scholars and students who keep the “futures vision” at the forefront. It must advance our understanding of the structural and systemic basis of race, indigeneity, ethnicity and bias through collaborations across disciplines and identities with communities in Ithaca, across the United States and beyond. For the Center to be transformational it must be a physical and virtual space that fosters exceptional teaching, research, public scholarship, and leadership in action.

3. Academics and Scholarship

The Center must be a programmatic space that is alive with talks, workshops, and exhibitions; a congenial space that promotes the intermingling of students, faculty, and visitors as it showcases to the outside world the work of those involved. We recommend that there be three programmatic dimensions to the Center: an annual focal theme, a pipeline-to-the-academy program, and various grant-making programs.

3.1 An Annual Focal Theme

We recommend that the Center draw on the successful model developed by the [Society for the Humanities](#), which identifies a [focal theme](#) each year. This programmatic aspect would include:

A Visiting Faculty Fellows Program that attracts scholars from across academia who are accomplished researchers in areas that relate to the focal theme. The Center should be an attractive destination for faculty who have a sabbatical leave from their home institution.

A Visiting Professor-of-the-Practice (PoP) Program that attracts non-academics from the public, civic and nonprofit sectors who have a record of accomplishment in areas that relate to the focal theme. They would teach special courses and seminars, perhaps having a half-time appointment in an appropriate academic unit. The [Rhodes Professors Program](#) that is associated with the West Campus initiative is a possible venue developing a visiting PoP version of the highly successful [Andrew D. White Professors-at-Large Program](#).

A Cornell Faculty Fellows Program that would support colleagues who perform research and teach in areas that relate to the focal theme.

Here are some potential focal themes:

- Technologies of Racism and Liberation
- Internet Access and Race
- Afro-Asian Connections
- Environmental Justice
- Public Health and Race
- Language Hierarchies and Race
- Settler Colonialization and White Supremacy in the Americas
- Comparative Entanglements: Blackness and Indigeneity

The Center can generate interest in antiracist work across all fields through carefully chosen focal themes.

3.2 A Pipeline-to-the-Academy Program

The Center should support efforts to create a pipeline for BIPOC students into fields where they are underrepresented both as graduate students and as faculty. For example:

A pre-doctoral program that would include summer schools and year-long mentoring programs that bring together advanced (or gap-year) undergraduates who are interested in graduate school and careers in academia. Collaboration with existing programs across campus, including the [McNair Program](#) that is managed by the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives, would be essential.

A post-doctoral program that would sponsor and support future faculty. Each participant would be situated in a unit that is relevant to their planned academic trajectory and serve as a research conduit to the Center.

3.3 Various Grant-making Programs

These programs would focus on Cornell scholars and students who work in areas that are of interest to the Center. Potential areas of funding include

- seed grants for radical transformative collaborations on issues of race, indigeneity and ethnicity
- focused research projects (including engaged research with communities, in collaboration with OEI)
- public scholarship, performance and outreach on a range of media
- conferences, performances and workshops
- summer writing support for faculty and advanced graduate students
- reading and discussion groups that would bring together faculty, students and community members
- dissertation and junior faculty writing groups

4. Collaborations

Early on we identified a host of [centers and programs](#) whose existing research and teaching agendas would be highly relevant to the mission of the proposed center. If the goal is to institutionalize a commitment to antiracism through a new center, then what would be its “environmental impact” on neighboring centers and programs? The impact will be positive if there is collaboration and the creation of new opportunities. It will be negative if the proposed center simply intensifies the competition for a fixed pool of resources. No one disputes that the latter must be avoided. The focus must be on making the case for collaboration, which also responds to President Pollack’s request that we develop a blueprint for a center that amplifies Cornell’s existing scholarship on antiracism. To do this we recommend an emphasis on comparative studies and intersectionality as that would bring together and strengthen individual research groups.

Collaborations with units across campus could be long-term or episodic, involve single units or groups of units, and be tied to grants or focal theme cycles. Here we focus on three long-term collaborations that we recommend building to help take the Center’s academic mission forwards and make it unique among its peers.

4.1 Collaborations with Core Academic Programs

There must be an ongoing and effective relationship between the center and these graduate fields, departments and programs: Africana, AIIS(P), Asian American Studies, FGSS, and Latino Studies. Faculty from these units will

have a critical role to play in terms of the design, implementation, and evolution of the educational requirement for students.

4.2 Collaboration with the University Library

The library will develop a Digital HUB to support and advance the research and teaching of faculty and students on topics of race and racial inequalities. The Digital HUB would provide access to the Library's archives and special digital collections that focus, on the cultural life of BIPOC communities, helping make the Center a landmark research institution into Black experiences and cross-cultural interactions. This collaboration would help support the curation of video and digital resources produced by Cornell faculty experts that will be used in delivering the educational requirements.

4.3 Collaboration with The School for Public Policy (SPP) and other Policy-focused Programs

The newly established SPP will have deep ties to the social scientific, scientific and technocratic communities, and a focus on evidence-based research and work that aims to transform policy, which is key to dismantling the structures and systems that create injustice and inequity. Other policy-related programs that focus on health, infrastructure, food systems, the built environment, and the digital world will also be critical collaborators. Because of their interdisciplinary component, the core academic programs mentioned above also support policy-focused curriculum and research.

5. Collaboration Infrastructure

The Center must have sufficient infrastructure if it is to realize its ambitions.

5.1 Infrastructure to Enhance External Funding Opportunities

The Center should provide support for the submission of high-quality proposals to funding agencies and foundations. The [Just Futures](#) initiative (Mellon) and the [RacialEquity2030](#) initiative (Kellogg) are examples of highly relevant funding opportunities. The Center should also help educate faculty and student researchers on ethical issues associated with community-based activist research, especially when BIPOC and other marginalized groups are involved. This would be a collaboration with the [Office of Research Integrity](#).

5.2 Infrastructure to Enhance BIPOC Engagement

The Center should be an inclusive space of gathering and belonging for BIPOC scholars and students, providing support that ensures long term success. This would be a collaboration with the [Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives](#). The acquisition of physical space might require partnering with Student and Campus Life wherein lies an interest in the cultural center idea. A carefully designed space for teaching and research can build community similar to how many [campus cultural centers around the country](#) have been building community.

5.3 Infrastructure to Enhance External Engagement

The Center should support students, faculty, and visiting PoP's whose antiracism work takes them into surrounding communities in Ithaca and surrounding counties. There are obvious partnership opportunities with the [Office of Engaged Initiatives](#) and the [Cornell Public Service Center](#).

6. Activism and Advocacy

One goal of the Center is to empower members of Cornell's BIPOC community as they participate in the research life of the university. This helps define the advocacy role of the Center within Cornell:

- It must advocate for BIPOC faculty and students by working to increase their research opportunities across campus and by taking steps to ensure that these opportunities are fully visible across our highly decentralized university. This would be a collaboration with the [Office of Undergraduate Research](#).
- It must advocate for full BIPOC representation in all academic units and decision-making bodies.

But more than that, the Center should be an "activist center", inspiring antiracist research and teaching in a way that creates greater justice and equity on campus and beyond. Its activism should have two components

- An education-driven component that prompts students to examine the extent of their personal antiracist behavior.
- A research-driven component that prompts those on the outside who create policy to make changes based on new understandings of structural racism and bias.

Both dynamics have been part of Cornell since its founding, namely, the belief in the value of a liberal arts education and the belief that research should have a practical and positive impact on society.

A liberal arts education has long been understood to have value insofar as it helps develop critical, reflexive skills and habits of mind that citizens need in order to be able to sort through the complex entanglements of our social, political and economic realities. Our graduates must be lifelong learners in all matters that concern antiracism.

The second activist component resonates perfectly with the University's official land grant mission statement:

As New York state's land-grant institution, Cornell University is charged with advancing the lives and livelihoods of the state's citizens through teaching, research and public service.

A small rewrite gets at the purpose of the proposed Center:

As New York state's land-grant institution, Cornell University is charged with advancing the lives and livelihoods of ALL the state's citizens through ANTIRACIST teaching, research and public service.

7. Governance

What would a democratic, transparent, accountable system of governance for an innovative inclusive university wide entity look like? The governance structure of the Center must reflect its mission, goals, and its academic and activist orientation. It must itself be a model for an antiracist, just, and equitable future.

We recommend that the Center be led by a member of the tenured faculty whose scholarship and work is firmly grounded in the goals, ambitions, and programs that define the Center. We propose that the Center Director be selected by a committee composed of equal parts students (undergraduate and graduate) and faculty, with some administrative representation as necessary. The students, faculty and staff who populate the selection committee should also have a track record of doing work on issues of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity on campus and/or beyond. Details for determining the membership of the selection committee remain to be developed. However, it should include faculty representatives from ASRC, AIISP, AASP, and LSP.

The Faculty Director should report to the Office of the Provost. The Director should provide leadership, and oversee all aspects of the Center's work. We expect fund-raising to be an important part of the Director's responsibility. The staff team should include an Associate Director who manages the Center's activities and day-to-day operation and who coordinates the many partnerships and activities outlined above.

There should be a Governance Council that works with the Center's leadership when framing scholarly ambitions and ongoing programming. It must be responsive to the needs of the Cornell community and regularly assess the Center's activity and impact. The Council should be made up of faculty and students. The student representatives should include undergraduates and graduate students drawn from BIPOC, issue-focused student organizations within each college/school including the Graduate School. The faculty representatives should be drawn from those departments and centers whose scholarship the Center seeks to amplify. There must be a clear channel to the Presidential Advisors on Diversity and Equity (PADE) and the group of Associate Deans that is regularly convened by the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.